Work on Nixon Homes Is Questioned by GAO

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Because a "casual attitude" existed in authorizing government-paid construction work at President Nixon's private residences at San Clemente and Key Biscayne, the President received some benefits not related to his protection, a congressional investigating agency concluded yesterday.

The General Accounting Office proposed an overhaul of the procedure used to appropriate money for work at presidential homes, and asked Congress to consider limiting the number of private residences at which permanent protective devices will be installed for a President.

The GAO said it found "disturbing" an arrangement in which Mr. Nixon's aides sometimes verbally authorized improvements to the President's home.

In one instance, the GAO said, a decision to have the government pay for five full-time gardeners at the San Clemente estate came at a meeting between former White House domestic adviser John D. Ehrlichman and officials of the General Services Administration.

Later, the Secret Service was asked to request the landscaping maintenance, thereby providing legal justification for the work, the GAO said.

Criticizing the procedure, the GAO said in a 99-page report, "The effective functioning of the Secret Service rests in good part on the prevailing belief that its protective measures are taken in good faith."

The landscape maintenance involved covered a pe-

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riod from October, 1969, to April, 1970, and cost the GSA $3,352 a month. Additionally, the Secret Service paid a head gardener $514 a month and the GSA paid a landscape architect $285 a month for consulting services.

The problem of distinguishing between landscape work that should be paid for by the government and that which should be assumed by the President "defied any clear solution," the GAO said.

However, the agency concluded, "it appears that the government did some landscape maintenance at both residences which should have been done at the President's expense."

Confirming previously released figures, the GAO said $1.4 million has been spent at the President's two homes. The GAO concluded that, with scattered exceptions, "almost all of this amount was spent for protective purposes."

The $1.4 million estimate does not include office complexes at San Clemente and Key Biscayne, the installation of military communications systems and other support facilities. When added to the work on the two residences, those costs raise the total expenditure to nearly $10 million.

The GAO devoted most of its criticism to the manner in which money was appropriated for landscaping, driveway paving and house heating at the President's San Clemente home.

However, the agency also suggested that Mr. Nixon received a direct, nonprotective benefit from the installation of such items as a $13,000 bullet-resistant swimming pool screen, a $19,300 private railroad crossing and cabana, unnecessary property surveys costing $8,400 and fire protection systems costing $33,300.

Of the installation of a new, electric forced-air heating system at San Clemente, the GAO said, "It appears that the Secret Service and the President's architect were both bent on replacing the heating system, the former to remove a safety hazard and the latter to carry out a general reconditioning of the residence."

The agency said that it might be argued that it would be unfair to require Mr. Nixon to pay for a new heating system requested by the Secret Service. But, the GAO said, "There is also . . . the more insistant question as to whether the government should pay the entire costs of the new system when the President intended to install one anyway."

As evidence of the President's intentions, the GAO produced a June 18, 1969, letter from Mr. Nixon's architect, Hal Lynch, to Ehrlichman, stating that a new system would be installed. In the letter, Lynch said a local contractor would install the system "acting under our direction."

Installation of the $13,500 heating system, the GAO concluded, "appears to have been a direct and substantial benefit to the President."

Another non-protective benefit to the President, the GAO said, was the paving of a driveway leading to Mr. Nixon's San Clemente residence.

The contractor who performed the original resurfacing said the existing driveway was about 30 years old and caused water to collect in front of the main house. The new driveway cost $10,600 and was requested by the Secret Service, the GAO said.

However, the requests, the agency said, "were apparently verbal, or, in the case of restoration work, were perhaps not made at all because such work was considered incident to other security work requested."

The GAO concluded that "there appears to have been a non-protective benefit to the President because the existing pavement was old."

The agency also criticized the expenditure of $3,800 for the GSA's share of a new sewer line, and the justification of that expense on the grounds that "official visitors would be entertained at the residence."

The GAO urged Congress to adopt legislation requiring that all security appropriations at private residences be made to the Secret Service and no other agency, and that the service should make an annual public report detailing its spending.

Moreover, the GAO said, non-security appropriations should be made to the White House, and the President should account for such spending in an annual report to Congress.